United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
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April 30, 2020

Hon. William P. Barr
Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Barr:

Please accept our prayers for you, your staff, and your loved ones during this trying time for our country. We wish to also commend your department on its work to end human trafficking and unlawful exploitation. We write to you today to urge you to confront the ongoing harms wrought by the pornography industry and to protect its victims. This should include enforcement of obscenity laws, investigation of pornography producers and website owners for criminality, national leadership in encouraging states and localities to develop rigorous policies against the industry and in the service of survivors, and more.

As you know, in December 2019, four members of the U.S. House of Representatives asked you to resume enforcement of federal obscenity laws in light of the evolution of internet pornography. On March 9 of this year, the chairman of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight, citing gruesome examples of abuse, called upon your office to investigate the owners of a major website, "Pornhub." Two days later, the Committee held a hearing on "Holding the Tech Industry Accountable in the Fight Against Online Child Sexual Exploitation." Now, in response to the global coronavirus pandemic and resulting social isolation, Pornhub has publicized offering free "premium" subscriptions.[1]

The current pandemic is exacting a heavy and widespread emotional, social, and financial toll in our communities. In the face of the pandemic, the Church expresses her solidarity with all who are struggling or alone. In a March 27 reflection, Pope Francis affirmed our common "belonging as brothers and sisters" in the midst of crisis and reminded us that, despite the demands of distancing and isolation, "we are on the same boat" and are all "called to row together…. [S]o we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this."[2]

Pornography is the antithesis of this. Rather than remembering and loving our fellow humans as brothers and sisters, it objectifies them – often directly exploiting them – and diminishes the health of users' relationships with others.[3] In fact, legislative chambers in at least 15 states have declared pornography a public health crisis in its own right.

But the reasons for the department to address the pornography industry are not limited to this moment. First, there are direct victims: the persons used in the productions. Many have their consent (even if technically

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[1] Natasha Turak, "Pornhub is offering free premium memberships to countries on coronavirus lockdown, sees traffic leap," CNBC.com, 20 Mar. 2020. Citations in this letter to non-USCCB documents should not be construed as an endorsement of the document or its content beyond the purpose of the citation.
[2] Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi Address (27 Mar. 2020).
[3] "Pornography dehumanizes the persons depicted, making them into objects of use. Those who produce and distribute pornography … do serious harm to the women and men who consent to be in pornographic material, often out of desperation for money or out of an impoverished sense of self-worth. Even worse, in some cases pornographers take advantage of those who cannot even give consent—children and other victims of human trafficking—which is both a grave sin and a heinous crime." U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography* (2015): 6.

legal) compromised by desperate circumstances while, for others, consent is completely absent.[4] The department rightly pursues human traffickers; however, virtually unchecked proliferation of pornography fuels the demand that frequently results in commercial sexual exploitation. Unprecedented, unlimited, and anonymous access to pornography via modern technology has led users to seek more and more extreme videos.[5] Thus, non-enforcement or lax enforcement of obscenity laws against producers and distributors may provide a gateway for this demand to metastasize, increasing the incidents of trafficking, child pornography, other abuse, and broader unjust conditions.[6]

Second, pornography harms families and communities in perceptible ways. Especially when viewed by the young, it provides a terrible model and expectation of how persons should treat each other, potentially leading to coercion or violence. The ubiquity of pornography in the hands of adolescents renders this not a concern of isolated incidents but of cultural proportions.[7]

"Pornography use hurts the user by potentially diminishing his or her capacity for healthy human intimacy and relationships."[8] As pastors, we frequently see the pain that results from a pornography habit. Marriages that are injured or even broken by a spouse's pornography use, which some divorce lawyers report as a factor in over half of their cases,[9] have a ripple effect on children and society. Strong families are necessary for strong, safe communities.

Thank you for your valuable time and attention, and may God bless you.

Sincerely,

Most Rev. Salvatore J. Cordileone Archbishop of San Francisco Chairman, Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth	Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley Archbishop of Oklahoma City Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development	Most Rev. David A. Konderla Bishop of Tulsa Chairman, Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage

[4] *See* Sohrab Ahmari, "The Woman Taking On Big Porn," First Things, 14 Feb. 2020 (also addressing attempts by an unrepresentative but high-profile few within the industry to advocate for it); *Clean Heart*, 8.
[5] *See Clean Heart*, 9-10, 12, 14.
[6] We do not differentiate between "obscene" and non-"obscene" pornography. Rather, the USCCB has affirmed that "all pornography is harmful and wrong." *Id*., 6. In fact, the increasingly graphic and severe nature of pornography may risk weakening the "contemporary community standards" element of adjudicating what legally constitutes obscenity. We speak of obscenity here, however, in recognition of the limits of the DOJ's authority under law.
[7] *See* compilation of statistical reports at "Statistics: Youth and Porn," Enough Is Enough. *Available at* https://enough.org/stats-youth-and-porn.
[8] *Clean Heart*, 7; *see also* Gail Dines and Robert Jensen, "A Pornography Habit Destroys Relationships," The New York Times, 11 Nov. 2012.
[9] *Clean Heart*, 14.